

Jeopardy Assessment
for the Proposed Incidental Taking Authorization
for the Butler's Gartersnake

Rogers/Thomson/Polzin Subdivision
Waukesha County, Wisconsin

Background

The state-threatened Butler's gartersnake is the smallest of the five Wisconsin gartersnake species. Both sexes of this species reach maturity during their second full year and females deliver 4-19 live-born young in mid to late summer. This species requires a moderately open to open canopy habitat, preferably with both upland and wetland habitat. Butler's naturally hibernate in open-canopy wetlands (sedge meadows, fringes of cattail marshes, etc.) but are also known to occupy sites that provide other means for successful overwintering (i.e. old landfills where conditions provide access below the frostline and where adequate moisture exists).

The Butler's gartersnake is a colonial species that is restricted to several southeastern counties in Wisconsin. There are currently 30 locations where this species has been documented from 1973 to present. Twenty-five of these records have been documented since 1990. Most sites that have been moderately to heavily surveyed for Butler's show a healthy age-class structure, indicating that regular recruitment is occurring on those sites. Surveys and monitoring since its listing in 1997 reveal that Butler's often occur in very large numbers on relatively small sites (i.e. 400+ snakes detected on a 20-acre site with less than 50% suitable [open canopy] habitat). Three intensive survey/monitoring efforts associated with mitigation for incidental take to date have involved large numbers of Butler's garter snakes (over 1200 Butler's on three isolated sites along Lincoln Creek within the City of Milwaukee). Surveys have also demonstrated that Butler's can occur, sometimes in high numbers, on highly disturbed and degraded sites. One example is the location of 62 Butler's during one survey of a brownfield site in the industrial heart of Milwaukee. Most of the snakes were found under pieces of broken concrete in a large, abandoned, gravel parking lot that was adjacent to a small wetland.

In summary, the Butler's gartersnake is a fast-maturing species with potentially high annual recruitment. The habitats required for this species have and are continuing to be lost due to development pressures within southeastern Wisconsin. Relatively large populations can potentially be sustained on relatively small sites (under 20 acres), which may or may not be degraded, but as these sites become further isolated, their populations may suffer from genetic stagnation. The long-term future of this species remains unclear and the protection of existing habitat seems essential to achieving stability and recovery.

Jeopardy Assessment

The proposed Rogers/Thomson/Polzin Subdivision Project may result in the incidental taking of the Butler's gartersnake. However, take is expected to be minimal due to the current condition of the habitat, which is primarily overgrown with brush or trees or in active agriculture. To mitigate any losses, the areas adjacent to the existing wetlands and some of the wetlands will be managed to remove brush and trees that currently limit their suitability for the snake. In addition, some of the active agricultural fields will be converted and managed as grassland habitat suitable for the snake. As a result, the department has determined that the proposed project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or recovery of the state population of these snakes or the whole plant-animal community of which they are a part.

Conservation Measures

The following conservation measures will be adhered to for the purpose of minimizing any adverse effect on the state threatened Butler's gartersnake.

1. Based on the Butler's Gartersnake Habitat Improvement plan dated 05-19-03, Thomson Corporation will:
 - Remove brush and trees from the wetlands and adjacent uplands in the areas specified,
 - Re-seed potential habitat areas as specified with native prairie plants,
 - Install snake exclusion fencing (silt fencing) as depicted.
2. Once initial construction of the subdivision is completed, the upland grassy areas adjacent to the house lots and grassy areas surrounding the detention pond west of the powerline crossing are to be maintained in an unmanicured state (unmowed or uncut) except that they should be mowed once per year between November 1 and March 15 (during the snake's inactive period).
3. The lot owners/home owners living adjacent the grassland areas designated as Butler's gartersnake habitat shall have a covenant or deed restriction that restricts them from doing any cutting or mowing beyond their legal lot limits to insure that Butler's gartersnake habitat is maintained in an unmanicured condition from March 16-October 31 each year. The covenants or deed restrictions must remain in effect upon the transfer of ownership of the lots or home sites.